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CIA Calls Sho Against Nicaragua

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CIA officials have told Congress that the intelligence agency has assumed virtual day-to-day control over guerrillas fighting the Nicaraguan government, pinpointing their targets and plotting their attacks, according to congressional sources.

The CIA defends its increased control over the Nicaraguan guerrillas by contending that it guarantees the "secret war" will remain within congressionally approved guidelines.

Congressional intelligence sources say, however, that they doubt the CIA's claims and fear the covert operation may be out of control — and in violation of U.S. laws.

New evidence of the increased scope of American involvement emerged last week as Congress began questioning whether the CIA had exceeded its authority. By law, that authority is limited to using the Nicaraguan rebels to interdict alleged weapons shipments from Nicaragua to guerrillas fighting the U.S.-backed government in El Salvador.

Sources in Washington and in Honduras say the CIA role shifted within the past month from arm's length contacts with the guerrillas to face-to-face and daily direction of a force whose avowed intention is to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

The sources, some of them briefed by CIA officials on the nature of American involvement, said the CIA had provided the following examples of its activities:

- CIA and U.S. military intelligence operatives now confer daily with leaders of the 4,000 to 6,000 anti-Sandinista rebels operating inside Nicaragua and on the Honduran side of the 400-mile border.

- American agents pinpoint targets for the rebels, plot how and when the targets should be attacked and debrief raiders when they return to Honduras from Nicaragua.

- CIA officials are asking Congress for an additional \$20 million — perhaps as much as \$25 million — to continue the operation well into 1984.

- "Thousands" of CIA-ordered listening devices and metal detectors are being deployed along Honduran-Nicaraguan border areas believed to be supply routes for arms to Salvadoran guerrillas.

- U.S. spy planes — as many as five of them — their fuselages bristling with antennas, regularly sweep the border, as well as air and sea lanes between Cuba and Nicaragua.

According to CIA officials at briefings for congressmen, the thrust of the U.S. campaign continues to be to interdict the flow of weapons to El Salvador and to gather intelligence on Sandinista and Cuban activities in Nicaragua.

"We are being told that, every day, Americans remind the rebels in Honduras what the purposes of the missions are, and not to exceed their orders," said a skeptical congressional intelligence source who asked to remain anonymous. "They tell us that preserving U.S. control of the operation is now more of a priority than deniability."

Liberal congressmen argue, however, that the scope of covert war already exceeds levels approved by the House and Senate Intelligence Oversight subcommittees. They call for an end to the operation.

Congressional sources said President Reagan signed a "presidential finding" in November 1981 certifying the need for a covert CIA campaign to stem the unrest that he accused Nicaragua and Cuba of sowing throughout Central America.

The finding was accompanied by a \$19.9-million budget, much of it to expand U.S. intelligence-gathering operations curtailed during the CIA upheavals of the mid-1970s, the sources said.

Other congressional sources said only \$1.5 million to \$3 million went to train and arm the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN), at the time largely made up of Nicaraguan National Guardsmen who fled to Honduras after the Sandinistas toppled President Anastasio Somoza in 1979.

\$20-million request

CIA Director William Casey asked Congress in January for about \$20 million to continue funding the covert campaign into the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1, congressional intelligence sources added.

To preserve Washington's "deniability," the early U.S. money was channeled to the FDN through Argentine military intelligence officers drawn to Central America as counterweight to the Argentine leftists who flocked to Managua after the Sandinista triumph.

But Argentina reportedly recalled most of its agents after the United States sided with Britain during the Falklands/Malvinas war last year. Only a handful of Argentines remained with the FDN by year's end, among them Col. Carmelo Gigante, who was awarded a Honduran army medal in February.

CIA officials, in secret briefings with congressmen, reported that the U.S. intelligence contingent in Honduras was forced to expand to take up the Argentines' slack, congressional sources said.

Late last year, according to the CIA briefers, the agency ordered the FDN to shut down its Honduran training bases and move into Nicaragua to increase the pressure on the Sandinistas to stop shipping weapons to El Salvador.

The congressional sources say that by then, the "secret war" was

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